

The Many Faces of Paso Robles CAB (Cabernet and Bordeaux)

VINTNERS EXPLAIN THE SUBTLETIES BEHIND EACH OF **THE SUB-AVAS**

by Michelle Ball / photos by Jeremy Ball

The Willow Creek District AVA looking south. Paso Robles's topography of rolling hills, terraces and complex soil profiles make it difficult to pigeonhole a sub-appellation into a specific category. As Damian Grindley of Brecon Estate puts it, "To do a general brush stroke anywhere in Paso Robles is kind of tough because of those little microclimates." J. Lohr's Director of Winemaking Jeff Meier added to that, stating, "At least in the regions where we are, the soils are highly varied over very short areas," and each soil is going to have different water-holding capacity. Therefore, to make a generalization in any region is difficult.

It's hard to deny Cabernet Sauvignon's dominance in the wine market. This heat-loving, mid- to late-ripening grape thrives in Bordeaux's well-drained soils and has made itself at home in Paso Robles, on California's Central Coast. The most widely planted red wine variety in California is also the most widely planted grape in Paso Robles, as producers have found the region to exhibit near perfect growing conditions for this beloved red wine. What makes Paso Robles ideal for Cabernet Sauvignon is not only its ability to consistently achieve ripeness (the region is known for its high daytime and cool nighttime temperatures during the growing season), but also the area's unique soil profiles.

In the last decade, Paso Robles has commanded the attention of professionals and consumers, wooing them with numerous examples of world-class Cabernet Sauvignon and Bordeaux-style blends. "Paso Robles is being disruptive to the world of Cabernet Sauvignon," explains Daniel Daou, proprietor and winemaker at DAOU Vineyards & Winery. Daou is one of the founding members of the Paso Robles CAB (Cabernet and Bordeaux) Collective, a grassroots organization founded in 2012 that's effectively seeking to work together as a group to produce exceptional "CABs" and elevate their exposure at a global level.

In 2014, the Paso Robles AVA (which spans 612,000 acres) was divided into 11 sub-appellations, many of which produce superior-quality Cabernets and Bordeaux-style blends. To better understand the characteristics of each of these sub-appellations, 15 producers from eight of the 11 sub-appellations were interviewed with regard to producing Cabernet Sauvignon. Many of them work with fruit from more than one sub-appellation, which allowed for greater insight and comparison. Of course, there are numerous other factors to consider when evaluating the characteristics of a wine, including the hand of the winemaker, farming practices, clones, elevation, etc. However, there was considerable overlap in regard to physiological development, flavor profiles and tannin textures within each sub-AVA.



Nearly every vintner in every sub-AVA touched on the extraordinary phenolics found in Paso Robles Cabernet Sauvignon. Phenolics can tell you the size of the wine, the stability of the color pigments, how much oak the wine can handle and more. As Daou put it, "When you take the combination of great soils, like the ones in France, and great climate, like we have in Paso Robles, you have the combination that is something not found anywhere else in the world. Which is why we end up having some of the highest phenolics in the world ever recorded for grapes."

Adelaida District: "Superb Concentration"

The Adelaida District is perhaps one of the best-known sub-AVAs from a consumer standpoint. However, it's also one of the most diverse, covering a considerable area from east to west, with elevations ranging from 900 to 2,200 feet and a wide range of soil profiles, though predominantly calcareous.

Harvest dates varied among producers depending on altitude. Daou, whose vineyards are situated as high as 2,000 feet in elevation, along with David Parrish, grower and winemaker of Parrish Family Vineyard, tend to harvest in mid-to-late September due to an earlier bud-break and warmer nights. While other producers, including Brecon Estate and J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines, noted a longer hang-time with harvest dates in mid-to-late October and early November.

Yet there was a consistent response in regard to tannin structure. Daou noted, "It's an area that gets a lot of rain, so a lot of the vineyards here are dry-farmed. When you dry-farm Cab, it really gives you that superb concentration and the small berries that add the powerful tannin structure you need to age Cabernet." Parrish, who owns vineyards in the Adelaida, El Pomar and Creston Districts, echoed Daou, stating, "I would say on a good vintage Adelaida is going to have more tannins; it's going to be a bigger wine and probably a little less fruit-forward."

Paso Robles Willow Creek District: "Phenomenal Grapes"

Willow Creek is located south of the Adelaida District, and while they are similar in their elevation range and largely calcareous soil profile, this region is cooler due to a greater marine influence. This results in longer hang-time with harvests typically in mid-to-late October and early November depending on the elevation and vineyard aspect.

Owner and winemaker Guillaume Fabre of Clos Solène prefers "a slightly leaner wine" and was drawn to the Willow Creek area due to its cooler climate and soil. Fabre said, "I was really attracted to it because it reminded me of my Languedoc roots," referring to the region's climate.

Christian Tietje, winemaker for Rotta Winery, describes the area as an old marine bed with a considerable amount of "bone rock." The resulting Cabernets he describes as having "extreme concentration because of very thin soils, really interesting substrates and lots of interesting rock mixed in, which all make for phenomenal grapes."

El Pomar District: "Sweet Spot"

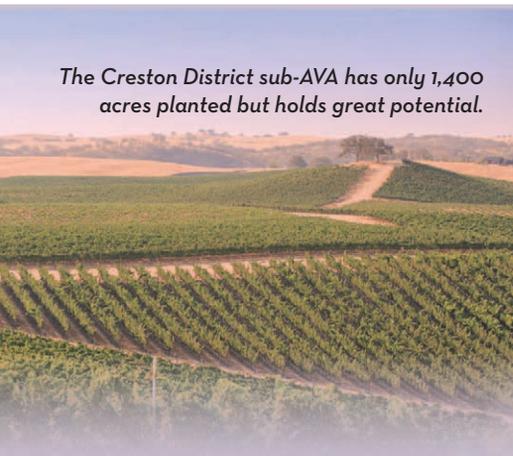
"We feel the El Pomar District is a sweet spot between the cooler climate and warmer climate of Paso Robles," said Matt Merrill, co-owner and winemaker for Pomar Junction Vineyard & Winery, "During a hot year, we are still a little cooler than most of Paso Robles, and in a cool year we're still a little warmer." This is primarily due to the influence of the Templeton Gap, which allows for cooler afternoon breezes. For that reason, Cabernet Sauvignon also sees a longer hang-time in El Pomar and harvest typically begins in mid-to-late October.

Riboli Family Wine Estates co-owner and winemaker Anthony Riboli sourced fruit from vineyards in El Pomar for years before planting/investing in three estate properties in the region. Riboli was drawn to the area because of its unique soils, steep hillsides and ample amounts of quality water. "We see more color in El Pomar, and I like the flavor profile. I like to see more of the black fruit versus the red fruit character, and I think some of that is because it's cooler," said Riboli.

Parrish also owns a vineyard in El Pomar, next-door to one of Riboli's properties. It's what Parrish likes to call "Middle Earth" due to its "West Side influence and East Side influence." Parrish describes the Cabernets from this site as having "big tannins but more fruit forward."

The El Pomar District has unique soils, steep hillsides and ample amounts of quality water.





The Creston District sub-AVA has only 1,400 acres planted but holds great potential.

Creston District: “More Fruit-Forward”

Of all the sub-AVAs in Paso Robles, Creston may still be considered the “Wild West.” The 47,000-acre AVA has only 1,400 acres planted, yet the vintners interviewed were inspired by the region’s potential. The region has an elevation range of 1,000 to 2,000 feet, so it is very site-specific, with hilltop blocks ripening earlier.

Owner and winemaker Mike Mooney of Chateau Margene pointed out that Creston is typified by its well-developed terraces and hillside soils. “We’ve got a lot of this granitic and sedimentary rock, sandy loams and clay loams at depth.” Mooney observed that bud-break typically occurs in April and their normal pick date is the last week of September. “We’re typically in the 25 to 26 Brix range, and that’s in the last week of September. So, if we needed to, in a cooler vintage we could leave it on another four to five weeks, but we’ve never had to,” he laughed.

The Parrish home ranch is also in Creston, but he noted that his site typically sees a longer hang-time with harvest taking place in late October. “We see softer tannins because we hang the fruit longer, and more fruit-forward wines,” said Parrish. This is also dependent on vintage; tasting the 2012 (a cooler year) and 2013 (a warmer year) side by side, the 2012 was softer in tannins with more date-like qualities due to the longer hang-time while the 2013 had more spice, slightly bigger tannins and more acidity.

San Miguel District: “Vibrant Red-Fruit Flavors”

Located at the north end of the Paso Robles AVA and straddling both sides of the freeway, this sub-AVA sees very little rainfall (11.4” on average) and is made up of alluvial terraces and alluvial sands. J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines owns vineyards primarily in San Miguel and Estrella for their Bordeaux program, with nearly 1,100 acres planted specifically to Cabernet Sauvignon by Paso Robles pioneer Jerry Lohr.

Lohr’s daughter and Vice President of Marketing Cynthia Lohr explained that the area’s unique growing conditions “really brought about the intensity and concentrations of the flavors he was seeking.” Lohr described the Cabernets from San Miguel as having a longer hang-time with “rich, ripe, vibrant red-fruit flavors” and “softer in tannin structure—which for us is what we’re seeking; we want a soft plush Cabernet that is drinkable now but able to age.” In comparison, she noted that their Estrella vineyards tend to produce bolder tannins than San Miguel.

Santa Margarita Ranch: “Purity of Place”

Located in its own southernmost corner, this region has a single tenant: Ancient Peaks’ Margarita Vineyard. The vineyard itself is extremely diverse, ranging six miles from tip to tip. Originally leased and planted by Robert Mondavi in 1999, the land is now owned by the three farming families who purchased back the lease in August 2005 after Mondavi sold to Constellation Brands.

“When we started this company, we realized we could do something special with Cabernet Sauvignon,” said Ancient Peaks’ Director of Winemaking Mike Sinor. “We really felt we could bring something to market that was different, and that’s what Mondavi saw! It’s colder here; these wines are unique, and there’s a purity of place.”

The region shares many of the distinctive calcareous and alluvial soil profiles found throughout Paso Robles but experiences a greater marine influence and higher average rainfall. Sinor explained that their Cabernet does well in blocks located at a higher elevation; row orientation is more north-south and leans towards the warmest parts of the ranch.

When asked about the profile of their Cabernet, Sinor told us, “They tend to be just a little leaner; they’re tighter. Then again,” he laughed, “that’s just the site. It’s not because we’re forcing it.”

Paso Robles Geneseo District: “Massive Temperature Swings”



Winemaker and owner Gary Eberle started his career in the Estrella District before purchasing 64 acres in what is now the Geneseo District. This was a piece of land that he examined with one of his professors, Harold Olmo; “he was so excited about it because it was one continuous soil type,” Eberle recalls. Eberle described the soil profile as having “decomposed granite, some sand and very little clay. Our water here just goes straight through.” The Cabernet vines planted are from one clonal material sourced from the celebrated BV 2 vineyard in Napa Valley. Eberle portrayed the resulting flavor profile as having “great color, good tannins and very stable pigments . . . The wine will be fruity in the mouth, but it will have what I call “bottle bouquet”—a characteristic that Eberle refers to as a “sweet dusty nose” or “your grandmother’s attic.”

Sterling Kragten, winemaker for Cass Winery, described the area around their property as “almost like a half bowl.” He notes that while it is hotter there, they also benefit from the Templeton Gap influence which comes up through the Huer Huerdo Creek and settles in the valley. “We still get massive temperature swings but a little bit hotter days, which really suits the Bordeaux varieties,” said Kragten. As far as flavor profile, he added, “You would expect a jammier type of Cab, because most people expect the East Side to be hotter, but our style here tends to be a little bit lighter . . . You have some bright fruit flavors, but you get a little bit of that classic Old World green kind of spice.”

Collaboration, Not Competition

Each sub-appellation has a unique set of characteristics and many of the vintners agreed they are a far better tool for consumers than “East Side” and “West Side,” a reference to Highway 101, which runs north-south through the city of Paso Robles. “Dividing them up I think helps the consumer when there are vintages that are maybe better in one area than another,” said Parrish. Cynthia Lohr echoed this sentiment, stating, “With differentiation, we have the perfect opportunity to educate consumers and really draw them in from the standpoint of ‘What is the beauty of Paso Robles Cabernet? Why there are so many different flavor profiles and subtleties?’”

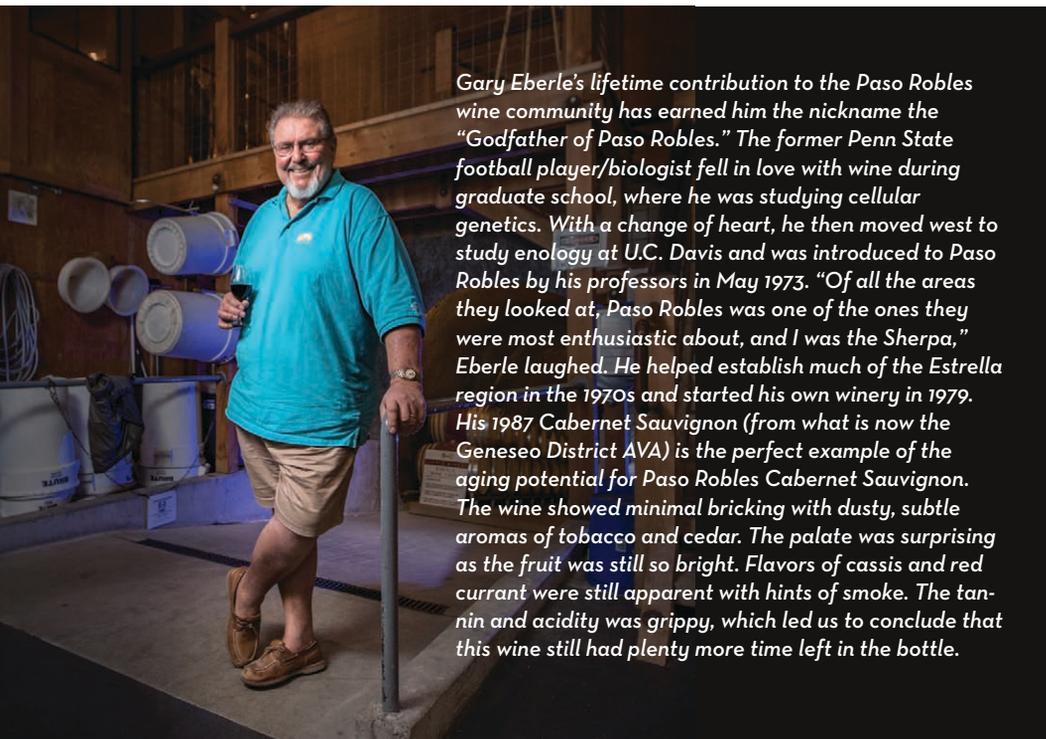
Those vintners who sourced from multiple sub-appellations also appreciated the opportunity to blend various profiles. “We have all these different flavors to play with, and then we add different French oak at different toast levels from different-grain barrels—we have this gigantic spice rack of flavors to play with,” said Mooney. Both Mooney and Parrish also noted that they approach the fruit from each region differently, both in the vineyard and in the winery.

However, most agreed it would be difficult to pinpoint a wine’s sub-appellation in a blind tasting. As Kevin Sass, winemaker for Halter Ranch, put it: “There’s so much variability of what people do around here depending on style that you’re never going to be able to say, ‘Oh, Adelaida.’ I think the hand of the winemaker is so much more influential here.”

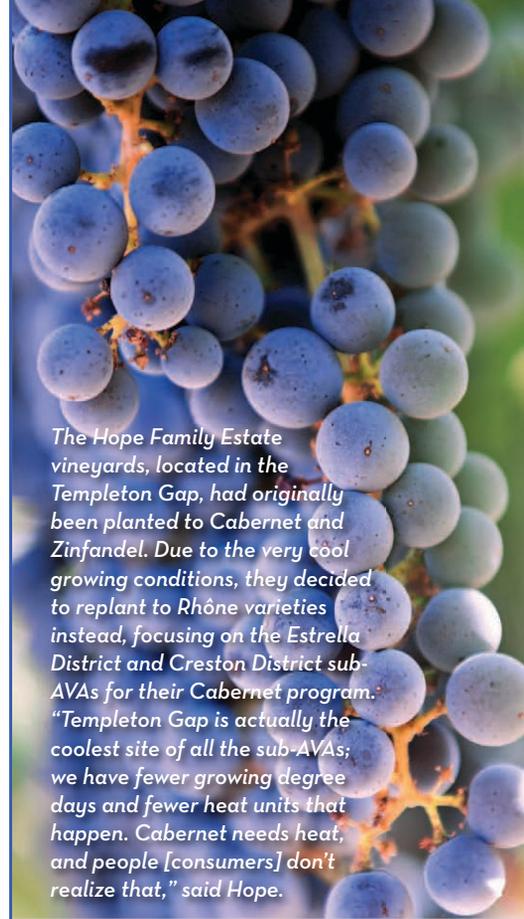
In terms of geology and soils, Austin Hope, president and winemaker of Hope Family Wines, who focuses heavily on soil profiles before deciding where to plant, lease or source, explained that many of these “interesting soils” are pocketed throughout Paso Robles, so it’s ultimately very site-specific and not necessarily AVA-specific.

Damian Grindley, proprietor and winemaker of Brecon Estate in the Adelaida District, said, “One of the great things is there are so many microclimates; there are so many nuances between the different vineyards, and then you blend them together and use different winemakers and different oaks—it seems like there is no right way or wrong way to do it. And there are a bunch of different expressions of the varietal.” Grindley then summed up the overall sentiment of everyone interviewed: “The great thing about the CAB Collective and Paso Robles in general is everyone’s not out for themselves. They’re out for raising the game of Paso Robles overall.” ❖

Look for our Paso Robles CAB Collective Somm Camp report in the June-July issue.



Gary Eberle’s lifetime contribution to the Paso Robles wine community has earned him the nickname the “Godfather of Paso Robles.” The former Penn State football player/biologist fell in love with wine during graduate school, where he was studying cellular genetics. With a change of heart, he then moved west to study enology at U.C. Davis and was introduced to Paso Robles by his professors in May 1973. “Of all the areas they looked at, Paso Robles was one of the ones they were most enthusiastic about, and I was the Sherpa,” Eberle laughed. He helped establish much of the Estrella region in the 1970s and started his own winery in 1979. His 1987 Cabernet Sauvignon (from what is now the Geneseo District AVA) is the perfect example of the aging potential for Paso Robles Cabernet Sauvignon. The wine showed minimal bricking with dusty, subtle aromas of tobacco and cedar. The palate was surprising as the fruit was still so bright. Flavors of cassis and red currant were still apparent with hints of smoke. The tannin and acidity was grippy, which led us to conclude that this wine still had plenty more time left in the bottle.



The Hope Family Estate vineyards, located in the Templeton Gap, had originally been planted to Cabernet and Zinfandel. Due to the very cool growing conditions, they decided to replant to Rhône varieties instead, focusing on the Estrella District and Creston District sub-AVAs for their Cabernet program. “Templeton Gap is actually the coolest site of all the sub-AVAs; we have fewer growing degree days and fewer heat units that happen. Cabernet needs heat, and people [consumers] don’t realize that,” said Hope.

Paso Robles Estrella District: “Interesting Soils”

Austin Hope works with multiple producers throughout Paso Robles but specifically focuses on the Estrella and Creston Districts for his Treana Cabernet Sauvignon program. “We quickly learned that Cabernet was a great thing to grow out there in Estrella; there are some interesting soils that straddle the Estrella District, and they also show up in the Creston District.” The primary soils Hope seeks for Cabernet are gravelly, pebbly, well-drained soils.

RN Estate owner and winemaker Roger Nicolas owns a 40-acre hilltop property in the Estrella District. A former restaurant professional, Nicolas chose this site “because I thought it was ideal for growing Bordeaux varieties.” Nicolas added, “The Cabernet here works so well, and it’s so easy to deal with—here on our vineyard anyway. It just gives what you expect from it.” Nicolas prefers a leaner-style Cabernet, and he described the profile: “Aromas and flavors of black licorice and cassis—that’s what hits me from the great wines from the Left Bank of Bordeaux, and I’m able to get that from here.” ❖